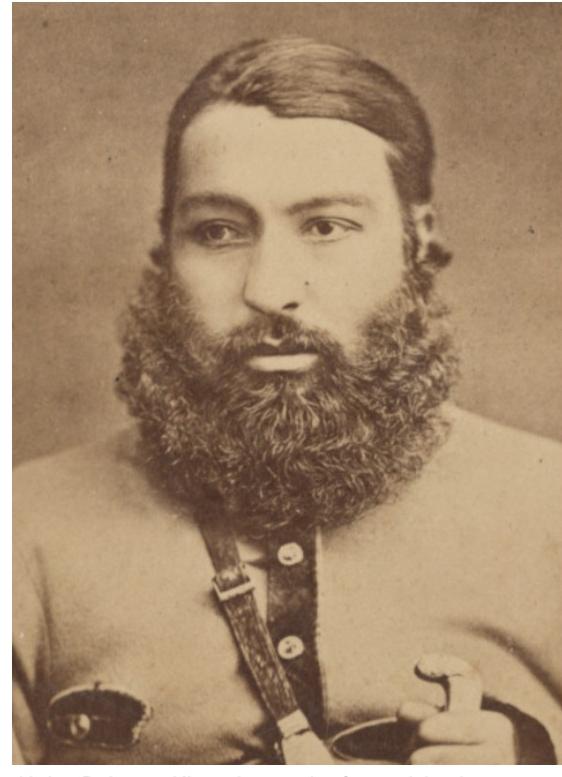


Empty, pro-imperialist rhetoric

A response to Chris Cutrone's "Afghanistan"

Hari Kumar



Abdur Rahman Khan during the Second Anglo-Afghan War (1878-80)

PLATYPUS CONSIDERS ITSELF SOCIALIST.¹ Why does it then print pro-imperialist rhetoric and dismiss "New" and "Old" Lefts? It is one thing to say, "Today there are nothing but idiots."² Far more disturbing is the following: "The Left [...] under the shadow of the Cold War and Vietnam, cannot acknowledge let alone recognize properly that the U.S. is not the source but only the central — and indispensable — actor in the politics of global capitalism. Anti-Americanism is a sham;" "The U.S. of all things in global capitalism really is 'too big to fail.'"³

Such extraordinary Left-dressed, theatrical rah-rah — for U.S. imperialism! Cutrone says, "old 20th-century" divisions between imperialist and dependent countries are passé: "there are only First and Third Worlds — and perhaps not even that distinction holds."⁴

Denying distinctions between imperialist and dependent nations does not unravel Afghanistan events. In contrast, recognizing imperialist dictums to "divide and rule" to empower indigenous stooges does explain history. In semi-colonial countries, nationalists strive for reforms against imperialisms. How did this play out in British India and Afghanistan up to today? Apparently the depressing story bears repetition.

1. Dividing Afghanistan's Pashtuns by the imposed Durand Line

Migrations made Afghanistan a multinational state at the end of the 19th century. Only nominally independent, it was left as an un-swallowed "buffer" between the Tsarist Russian Empire and the British Empire in India. The "Iron Amir," Abdur Rahman Khan, summarized the dilemma in 1900: "How can a small power like Afghanistan, which is like a goat between these lions [Britain and Tsarist Russia], or a grain of wheat between two strong millstones of the grinding mill, stand in the midway of the stones without being ground to dust?"⁵

Afghan monarchs from the Durrani tribe of the Pashtun nation attempted to gain nationalist independence to varying degrees. Afghanistan's eastern boundary was tested by three Anglo-Afghan wars, which were never completely won by the British. Yet Britain was able to impose the 1893 Durand Line on Afghan rulers. This divided the Pashtun and Baluch territories, forcing portions into imperial India. This was to be the seed of Pashtunistani nationalism, threatening later Pakistani leaders — one example of the enduring principle of divide and rule, routinely applied to the Indian "jewel" of the British Empire.

2. Two sections of indigenous capitalists

National capitalists are indigenous capitalists resisting foreign control. In the early 20th century they derived inspiration from the then anti-imperialist, socialist USSR. Indigenous capitalists faced several problems. First, while they needed workers to effect democratic reforms, they feared the masses. Moreover their countries previously had minuscule working classes anyway, often being peasant-based and "feudal." Pseudo-socialist programs led by nationalists enabled attacks on tribal and feudal remnants while state resources went to capitalist development. Historically, however, they faced increasing control by imperialism. Sometimes weak nationalists tried joining forces (e.g., the Bandung Non-Aligned movement). Finally, if indigenous capitalists did attain power, they tried to minimize "aid" or strings-debts, often bargaining in imperialist-shopping. Fading British imperialism (especially after Suez), was often out-bidden by one — sometimes both — of the two newer dominant world powers, the U.S. and post-1953 USSR. (The USSR economic basis changed from socialism into capitalism).⁶

Meanwhile other capitalists found profit in imperialism, becoming business facilitators, compradors, or agents. They often allied with rural landlords. Over time they also increasingly "bargained." Pakistan escalated this into manipulating the U.S.

3. British divide and rule of imperial India

British imperialists refined the art of transforming dangerous militants into tame compradors. Allan Hume, shrewdly created the Indian Congress Party in 1885 to neutralize democratic Indians: "A safety valve for the escape of great and growing forces generated by our own action, was urgently needed and no more efficacious safety-valve than our Congress movement could possibly be devised."⁷

After World War II, direct colonial rule was replaced by indirect neo-colonialism. Sir Stafford Cripps admitted to parliament:

What, then, were the alternatives which faced us? Those alternatives were fundamentally two [...] first, we could attempt to strengthen British control in India [with] [...] a considerable reinforcement of

British troops [...] The second alternative was, we could accept the fact that the first alternative was not possible, and make a further attempt to persuade the Indians to come together [...] One thing that was, I think, quite obviously, impossible was to decide to continue our responsibility indefinitely — and, indeed, against our own wishes — into a period when we had not the power to carry it out.⁸

4. Partition of India

In 1933, Chaudhuri Rahmat Ali at Cambridge University, proposed a multinational partitioning of Muslim-majority parts of India into "PAKSTAN": P (Punjab), A ("Afghanistan," i.e., the North-West Frontier Province), K (Kashmir), S (Sind), TAN (Balochistan) — this became "Pakistan" ("the Land of Pure"). In 1947, Britain's direct colonial rule ended with two dominions, India and Pakistan.

The 1947 Partition into "India" and "Pakistan" was not on the basis of ethnicity, but rather religious belief. The Indian Empire was divided between two dominions, creating a permanent tension between them, strengthening continued domination. It led to migrations, refugees, and persecuted minorities.

In 1947, the Durand Line remained the frontier dividing Pashtuns between Afghanistan and Pakistan. Balochistan became an oppressed nation under the dominant Punjabi nation of the state of Pakistan. This lit the long fuse of the "Pashtunistan" national question still burning today.

5. The multinational, feudal character of Afghanistan

Afghanistan is a land-locked, multinational state dominated by the Pashtuns in a tribal confederation comprising multi-racial groups and nationalities.⁹ Roughly, Pashtuns comprise 40% of those speaking Dari or Pashto (in two factions, Abdali or Durranni Pashtuns (usually the rulers) and Ghilzai Pashtuns). Persian speaking Hazaras (9%) and Tajiks (25%) inhabit the Hindu Kush. Further North, Uzbeks (9%), Turcomans, Kyrgyz, and others speak Turkic languages.

Till the 1980s, Afghanistan was predominantly agricultural with a large nomadic population. Before the Russian invasion, 88% of the total population of Afghanistan lived in rural areas.¹⁰

It is thought that in 1975, the population approximated 17 millions, of whom 14% (2.4 million) were in urban areas.¹¹ In 1966-67, 77% of people were agriculturists, while only 6% were in industry or handicrafts, and 2.2% worked in construction and mines.¹² The predominant mode of production was tribal feudalism with the khan, who was "economic lord and master of peasants, and their unquestioned military, tribal, and administrative leader."¹³

The khans (Durrani Pashtuns) were installed around 1740.¹⁴ The mullah was a landowner, religious man.¹⁵ Both malik (administrative official) and mir-i-aab (owner of the water) were khan-appointed.¹⁶ Only 12% of land was arable, which was concentrated in a few hands: "In 1978 [...] 5% of the landowners were in possession of 45% of all cultivable land. About 83% of owners held between 5-10 acres of largely uneconomic land. [...] In 1978 there were thirty families in the country whose holding consisted of between 500 and 50,000 acres of agricultural land."¹⁷

Crops had five values derived from land, water, labor, capital, and seed.¹⁸ The peasant obtained only one-fifth of the yield; as land, capital, and seed were from landlords, and water from the mir-i-aab. The peasant being of the same tribe as landlord-khans was subject to tribal obligations. Khan, malik, mullah, and mirab made up the village council Jirgah to control rural life. Debts that were often inherited over generations dispossessed small land-parcels. The peasantry became a landless, agricultural proletariat working for payment in kind or cash. Later entry of tractors into villages, further worsened the life of peasants.

Even in 1978 there were 2.5 million nomads. The poorest joined the agricultural workers. But the wealthiest nomads, originally camel traders, became truckers, merchant capitalists, or money lenders. Commercial capital centered on the money bazaars of Kabul and Kandahar, but was initially controlled by Indians.¹⁹

As late as 1978, most non-state industry was owned by the Pakistani bourgeoisie. National Afghan capitalists centered in traditional trades of fruits and carpets.²⁰ Nonetheless a small, national-owned industry was started in the 1930s, by the merchant Abdul Majid Zabuli. Despite mulah resistance to usury, Zabuli also established a bank. The government levied customs duties, which was its main revenue stream, engendering close relations with smugglers.

6. Early governments attempt to modernize but are obstructed by mullahs

Amir Abdur Rahman began a slow centralization, without interfering with Islamic tribal structures. In contrast King Amunullah (1919-29) tried modernizing Afghanistan, and banning the *purdah* (veil). Religious opposition overthrew him: "[Following] Kemalism [in] Turkey [...] [he] promoted Western education, equality of the sexes, Western law not Islamic, agricultural modernization [...] religious and tribal leaders denounced these reforms as un-Islamic [...] Massive revolts in the countryside overthrew Amunullah in 1929."²¹

King Nadir Shah's short reign (1931-33) accommodated rural conservatism. The *Loya Jiragh* consisted of a reactionary monarchy allied to landowning chiefs and mullahs. All gains of women were repealed. Pashtu was declared the national language.²²

After Nadir's assassination, King Zahir Shah's reign continued as "stagnation."²³ Notwithstanding intentions, by 1947 a liberal movement began in the "Awakened Youth" (*Wikh-i-Zalmayyan*) movement. In relatively free elections in 1949 they had success, but were suppressed in 1953.²⁴

But pressure to modernize was building. The first U.S. contracts developed the Helmand River project. Increasingly, traders became thwarted by Pakistani blocks on trade routes. This spurred aid from the USSR for "an alternative trading outlet to break the country's previous dependence on trade via Pakistan. In 1950, the Soviet Union and Af-

ghanistan signed a new trade agreement; over the next five years, trade between the two countries rose by 50 per cent, with the Soviet Union taking a fifth of Afghanistan's exports. In 1961, another crisis year, 55 per cent of Afghan trade was with or through the Soviet Union.²⁵

In 1954 a \$3.5 million loan, and in 1955 loans of \$100 million ensured the revisionist USSR became the dominant ally.²⁶ Meanwhile Pakistan had joined the U.S.-run Baghdad Pact. By 1965, new elections were called. At Soviet revisionist urging, a united People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA) won three of five Kabul seats.²⁷

7. Who was the PDPA?

The PDPA was formed in 1965, by middle-class intelligentsia, civil servants, and teachers. But even this progressive movement contained tribal-based divisions. Nur Mohammed Taraki, a low-ranking civil servant and Hafizullah Amin, a teacher, organized the "Khalq" (people) faction.²⁸ Babrak Karmal, a member of the Durran Pashtun aristocracy, had close links to the monarchy. With Mir Akbar Khyber of the Military Academy, they formed the "Parcham" (flag) faction. These factions represented distinct strata:

Parchamites came from Persian-influenced, urban, upper-class backgrounds. Since many had family ties with the ruling elite, the Khalqis branded them the "Royal Communist Party." [They] spoke Dari, and were culturally isolated from Pashtun tribal life. By contrast, Khalqis represented the rising, newly educated, lower-middle-class Pashtuns from small towns and rural areas who wanted Pashtun influence to be dominant but also favored reclaiming lost territories.²⁹

The Khalq openly called for a "national united front of patriotic, democratic progressive forces" including the "national bourgeois." To carry the masses it called for the "primary objective of creating a socialist society."³⁰

But their real ambition was revealed in talking to American diplomats: "On 14 March 1965, Taraki described the party as a left of center political party: 'designed primarily to assist the middle class, to elevate the lower ranks of the population, and to obtain assistance from the wealthier elements for this purpose. [...] slightly left of center [...] to pre-empt [...] Daoud who [...] talks of his fondness for 'socialism.'" Even so, this was more progressive than Parcham who wanted to "assure the king that we are not Communists."³²

The Khalq represented the interests of the working class, peasantry, and the national capitalist class. But it was dominated by the national capitalist class. Parcham represented the interest of the feudal and monarchist landowners. However, both factions were supported by the USSR revisionists against Daoud.³³

8. The Daoud Coup ties itself to the USA, though allowing some modernization

In 1973, Prime Minister Daoud led a military coup against his cousin King Zahir. This signalled new modernization. Daoud called for support from the revisionist USSR, who had trained his officers.³⁴ The Parcham wing of Karmal joined Daoud's coalition government at Moscow's behest. The Khalqis of Taraki and Amin deemed Daoud policies "too conservative."³⁵

Indeed, Daoud retreated on several fronts. While proposing new land reforms, he never enacted them. This happened despite "urban-based land speculators" entering rural areas who "diluted the influence of the feudal landowners."³⁶ Daoud's original objection to Zahir's U.S. and Iranian sponsorship was dropped: "Daoud was a militant nationalist who believed that the King had betrayed Afghan interests by agreeing to a treaty giving Iran access to waters of the Helmand River."³⁷

Daoud had previously argued for an independent "Pashtunistan": "Daoud had long spearheaded Afghan irredentist demands for an independent, Afghan-linked "Pashtunistan" and [...] a Baluch state linking Baluch areas in Pakistan and Iran with Afghanistan."³⁸

Daoud went West. Enter the Shah of Iran, Saudi Arabia, and Henry Kissinger.³⁹ This led to a \$2 billion "aid" package, Savak agents thrown in gratis. This was the first entry of Wahhabi fundamentalism in Afghanistan:

Iran [...] replaced the USSR as Kabul's biggest aid donor, and a projected rail and highway network linking Afghanistan to Persian Gulf ports would have canceled out Afghan dependence on Soviet trade and transport outlets [...] The Shah's intelligence agency, Savak [...] and the CIA worked [...] with underground Afghan Islamic fundamentalist groups [...] and Ikhwan ul-Muslimeen (Muslim Brotherhood) and the Rabitat-al-Alam-al-Islami (Muslim World League) Saudi Wahabi orthodoxy [...] Savak channeled U.S. weapons, communications equipment, and paramilitary aid to anti-Daoud groups.⁴⁰

Pakistan, Savak, the CIA, and covert fundamentalists launched abortive, anti-Daoud coup attempts in 1973 and 1974.⁴¹ Nonetheless, by 1974, Daoud was firmly tied to the U.S. He purged Moscow supporters, ruptured relations with PDPA, and ratified a treaty to share Helmand waters with Iran, for which he had previously castigated King Zahir. He reneged on calls for "Pashtunistan."⁴² The 1974 economic agreement between Daoud and the Shah of Iran, moved Afghanistan away from its dependence on the Soviet Union.⁴³

9. The 1978 Saur (Taurus) Revolution

Absent a mass workers movement, the Khalq led an anti-Daoud coup with military allies. Led by the national capitalist class, from weakness it was forced to ally with pro-USSR Parchamite compradors. Nonetheless it displaced Durrani Pashtuns by Ghilzai Pashtuns for the first time. Taraki's government included Karmal and Amin.

The program of national democratic reforms attacked feudalism and illiteracy. Decree No. 6 targeted rural mortgages-debts; No. 7 marriage and bride-prices; No. 8 land tenure.⁴⁴ But despite "only 2.2% of landowners holding 42% of land," Afghan peasants opposed land reform.⁴⁵ Why? Feudal conservatism was fervently organized by Pakistan and the U.S. to destabilize the government. National Security Adviser Zbigniew Brezhnev's adopted the policy "Sowing shit — in Russia's backyard."⁴⁶ This was when pro-U.S., comprador fundamentalists (Buhanuddin Rabbani and Gulbuddin Hekmatyar) emerged.⁴⁷ We will see them later.

As Taraki stalled, Amin pushed on but was deemed by Moscow too independent: "Karmal and the Parchamites [were] 'more reasonable, more willing to listen' [...] The Khalqis were 'too radical, too headstrong, too unpredictable.'"⁴⁸

While pro-Brezhnev Russians portray Amin as a pro-U.S. tool, he merely insisted upon Afghani independence: "in friendship with all countries and utilisation of economic assistance rendered [...] with no regard to the socio-economic system of the aid-giving country, provided aid is unconditional and with the principle of non-interference in the affairs of one another and respect to national independence;" "No Soviet military bases will be built in Afghanistan because we do not need them."⁴⁹

That was not enough for Russia. Selig Harrison wrote of Amin, "I found him a formidable strongly nationalistic figure clearly not prepared to play the role of supine puppet. His confident attitude [...] was that he knew how to handle the Russians, who needed him."⁵⁰

Amin overplayed his hand. Yuri Andropov, Boris Ponomarev, and Dmitriy Ustinov ordered Russian troop invasion. Amin was killed, and compliant Parcham puppets were empowered: first Karmal, later Muhammed Najibullah. By 1984, 150,000 USSR troops and 10,000 non-military "advisers" occupied Afghanistan. Afghan National resistance grew into the National Islamic Front in 1979,⁵¹ comprising seven groups, including the "Afghan Arabs" of Osama bin Laden. From the start it was largely controlled by Pakistan and the U.S. The U.S. initially invested \$625 million.⁵² Appalling troop losses forced Russian retreat in 1988. But only after 3-5 million refugees flooded Pakistan and Iran,⁵³ leaving 15,000 Russian dead (but uncounted Afghan dead) and costing Russia \$5 billion per year.⁵⁴

After the 1988 Geneva Accords established a cease-fire, the stooge Najibullah lasted three years despite unrelenting attacks. By now only an utterly destroyed rural and urban infra-structure remained.⁵⁵ Former khans were now dependent warlords: "competing leaders dependent on opposing politically motivated military assistance; population subsistent on politically motivated humanitarian aid; destruction of the rural subsistence economy [...] flight of millions of mainly rural refugees to camps and cities in Pakistan and Iran; creation of refugee-warrior communities."⁵⁶

10. From Mujahideen Civil War to Taliban Regime to U.S. comprador regimes of Hamid Karzai to chaotic exit

Mujahideen factions escalated rivalries into open civil war, fueled by Pakistani secret services ISI and CIA. Revenues, ethnic, tribal, and religious affiliations drove rivalry. Pakistan and its U.S. paymasters favored Pashtun Hekmatyar over Ahmed Shah Masud, a Tajik. Pakistan wanted to secure "Durand" borders against Pashtun separatism, and build a Kashmiri mujahideen against India. Cash stakes were enormous, excluding extras like "Stinger" missiles: "Congress secretly allocated \$470 million for Afghan covert action in 1986 [...] upped to \$630 million in 1987, with matching funds from Saudi Arabia. [...] A regional commander drew a CIA retainer of \$20,000-\$30,000 a month."⁵⁷

Revenues from arms, foreign relief aid, opium, smuggling, and money-laundering were invested overseas.⁵⁸ The ISI formalized transnational trade in transport, smuggling, and opioids, linking Pakistan, Asia, Gulf-states, and Iran.

But recruits were needed. Jamiat-e-Ulema Islami (JUI), led by Maulana Fazlur Rehman, ran religious schools for impoverished students. By 1988, over half a million students were in 8,000 registered and 25,000 unregistered madrassas, all funded by Pakistan (both Zia ul Haq and Benazir Bhutto), Saudi Arabia, and the U.S.⁵⁹ Students were drafted as Mujahideen, watching as commanders become corrupt warlords.⁶⁰

Factionalism hampered the anti-Najibullah war. New government appeared imminent. The 1992 Peshawar Accords attempted unity, making a Tajik, Burhanuddin Rabbani president and Pashtun Hekmatyar PM. Urged by Pakistan, Hekmatyar demanded sole power. Ultimately Kabul fell to Masud's Tajiks and Uzbeks (under General Dos-tum). Hekmatyar shelled Kabul "mercilessly."⁶¹

By 1994, disillusioned ascetic students formed "Taliban" (*Talib*: seeking knowledge). Led by Mullah Mohammed Omar, dominated by Bin Laden's Wahhabis, they allied with Hekmatyar. Weary ex-Mujahideen joined. Saudi wealth helped form the 1996 Taliban "Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan" under Sharia law. Masud's forces now retreated to regroup as the "Northern Alliance" of Tajiks, Uzbeks, and minorities.

But after the 9/11 Wahhabi terrorist airplane attacks on New York, the U.S. launched open war. Carpet-bombing created high civilian casualties ("Collateral damage," said Secretary of Defence Rumsfeld). The Taliban was overthrown with a "light footprint," CIA and Special Forces coordinating the "Northern Alliance."⁶²

Any surrender of the

Obama gave way to Trump, who gave way to Biden. All wanted cheaper means to control Afghanistan than paying the blood-price of occupation. They would leave it to Pakistan to guard U.S. interests. Hence imperialism's "exit" fiasco.

Preliminary balance sheets are grim: "2,500 Americans had died fighting on Afghan soil, along with almost 1,000 troops from allies like Britain and Canada."⁷⁰ But the toll for Afghans has been far higher: At least 240,000 Afghans have died [...] many civilians [...] [By] estimates, American taxpayers had spent two trillion dollars."⁷¹

The Taliban government is led by Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar. Sirajuddin Haqqani (son of Jalaluddin Haqqani) is interior minister. The Haqqani allied to al-Qaeda and Osama bin Laden.

11. What comes next?

In the immediate term imperialists serve pabulum: "Foreign Minister Wang to Blinken: China stood ready to work with US 'for a soft landing'."⁷²

Nonetheless, imperial selfish interests demand, at minimum, material assets. Several new factors demand analysis, including perhaps these.

First, despite drastic humiliation, comprehensive calculations still place the U.S. as imperialist nation No.1, though challenged by China.⁷³ The EU will develop its own military force, also indicating the U.S. weakening. Similarly there are strong trading linkages between Germany to China and Russia.⁷⁴

Secondly, China has interests in Afghanistan: "to ensure Islamic extremism in Afghanistan does not spread to China's Xinjiang region."⁷⁵ "Close to home along the Af-Pak frontier [...] The Turkmen Islamic Party is believed to be the successor to the East Turkestan Islamic Movement."⁷⁶

Afghanistan is likely the beggar: "In 2018, 80% of Afghanistan's \$11bn public expenditure came from donors [...] Even during Obama years, Washington encouraged China to invest in the Aynak copper mine because of the scale of revenue it could provide to Afghanistan."⁷⁷

Moreover: "China's long-term strategic investment [includes] the Belt-and-Road Initiative [...] If extended from Pakistan to Afghanistan [...] it would open up a shorter land route to markets in the Middle East. [...] Kabul [makes] India's resistance to joining less consequential."⁷⁸

Thirdly, there are important resources at stake. Even in 2002, oil lines across Afghanistan borders were enticing: "Oil and gas-rich Central Asian states, in particular Turkmenistan, saw Afghanistan as a possible pipeline route to connect to world markets."⁷⁹

Now other lucrative assets have been discovered: "Afghanistan rests upon vast mineral and energy reserves, which the US Geological Survey values at \$1 trillion and the Afghanistan Minister of Mines values at about \$3 trillion [...] total amount of Chinese investment in Afghanistan reached \$521 million and construction contracts reached \$899 million by the end of June 2016."⁸⁰ "Afghanistan has what China most prizes: opportunities in infrastructure and industry building [...] and access to \$1 trillion in untapped mineral deposits, including critical industrial metals such as lithium, iron, copper and cobalt."⁸¹

Finally, Pakistan was irked by statements from Karzai and the Taliban on Pashtunistan, rejecting the "Durand Line": "The Karzai government [and] insurgent groups operating in both states including the Afghan Taliban and the Haqqanis in Pakistan do not recognise the legality of the border."⁸²

Complicating matters is the anti-Pakistani Tahafuz movement developed in Pakistani-held tribal lands: "The Pashtun Tahafuz Movement (Pashtun Protection Movement) [...] demanded an end to atrocities by Pakistan army and police in the Tribal Areas [...] A huge number of young Pashtuns [were] killed and abducted [...] labelled as terrorists for Pakistani Taliban [...] feared as supporters of Afghanistan's Greater Pashtuni-stan."⁸³

12. To Conclude

Cutrone seems to think the U.S. "will be missed": "One thing is certain: The U.S. served as well as checked all [powers] in Afghanistan and was thus both welcome and unwelcome there to all. The U.S. will be missed."⁸⁴

He concludes incorrectly: "There is no new Cold War between the U.S. and China nor is there an inter-imperialist rivalry between them."⁸⁵

Marxists in both Afghanistan and the West wishing to assist peoples of colonial-type countries should support breaking away from imperialist sway, while simultaneously creating independent Marxist movements moving to socialism away from nationalism. Obfuscating U.S. imperialism's power — or any other imperialism including China — can only serve reactionary ends. **IP**

¹ Parts of this article also appear in Hari Kumar, "Afghanistan, feudal reaction and imperialism — a battle continues," *The Left Berlin*, September 27, 2021, available online at <<https://www.thelleftberlin.com/afghanistan-feudal-reaction-and-imperialism-a-battle-continues/>>.

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²⁰ Anwar, "Tragedy of Afghanistan."

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"The dictatorship of the proletariat," cont. from page 1

themselves. There were thus value-crises in capital, which were crises of society as a whole. The result of these crises was the destruction of the value of both wages and capital. Capital became less profitable, the wage-earning potential of labor decreased, money went without opportunities for productive investment, and workers went unemployed. This was especially true at a generational level in which the reproduction of capital did away with jobs and the continued reproduction of workers created masses of unemployed and unemployable people.

Industrial production made human labor increasingly superfluous to the production of wealth, and thus the social value of human activity and life became not realized through productive activity but negated by it. Marxism thought that this meant the possibility and necessity of overcoming the valuing of human activity and life through labor as a measure of social wealth. This was the motivation for the proletarianized working class's struggle for socialism.

In today's terms of measuring social wealth through GDP (Gross Domestic Product) and Per Capita Productivity and Purchasing Power Parity, there is a contradiction between these indices of

economic activity and actual individual and collective life and wellbeing in society. The United States has remained the highest GDP and PPP country in the world, with the highest productivity of labor. And yet there are increasing numbers of unemployed and unemployable people, and what labor employment exists and increases consists of new forms of work that are — temporarily — not yet replaceable by technology, for instance the "service sector."

This is the immiseration of society in capitalism that Marx observed and which has continued up to today.

In socialism, the industrial superfluousness of workers was to be replaced by the superfluousness of work. As Marx envisioned it, work was to go from "life's prime need" to "life's prime want" — people would work because they wanted to, not because they needed to do so, either individually or collectively. The possibilities of science and technology as a higher form of social cooperation than the division of labor would allow "from each according to his ability and to each according to his need."

The increased specialized division of labor in bourgeois social cooperation continues, but with an increasing and intensifying gulf opening between the new forms of social interdependence thus created and the forms of socially valuing and supporting the laboring activity and human lives thus employed.

Bourgeois demands for recognition of equal social and political rights to participation in and contribution to as well as share in consumption and production and reproduction of present and future wealth come up against the limits of the bourgeois form of such rights — the value of laboring activity — and the value of capital as measure of social production and consumption: the limits of capitalism as a self-contradiction of bourgeois society in industrial production.

The politically strategic vision of Marxism was that, to break the repetitive cycle of capitalist crisis and destruction, the wage-laborers would need to abolish wage labor — the laborers would need to abolish labor. It was not enough that the capitalists destroyed capitalism — that capitalism destroyed capital. The very basis for the reproduction of capital — labor — must be overcome. What society already was doing in capitalism in an unconscious and self-alienated way must be overcome in a disalienated and self-conscious way. But first it would need to be done consciously: the working class must politically and socially take over and appropriate capitalism before it can be overcome.

Thus was the Marxist vision of the dictatorship of the proletariat.

The death of the Left
Today, the ostensible "Left" — the avowed "socialists" — have abandoned the goal of the dictatorship of the proletariat, either in words or in fact, the latter by reinterpreting the dictatorship of the proletariat to mean the governing of capitalism by sociologically working-class political parties in a welfare-state or so-called "social democracy."

For instance, the DSA (Democratic Socialists of America) *Jacobin* magazine publisher Bhaskar Sunkara has recently offered that perhaps achieving socialism in the United States is impossible, but what is possible is "social democracy," by which he meant a better social welfare state.

But even to the extent that Sunkara and his *Jacobin* comrades still claim to be not social democrats but rather (small-d) democratic social

COVID, capitalism, and communism

Karyn Pomerantz



Chemical Defense Unit, USSR, ca. 1940s.

DISASTERS REVEAL THE TRUE NATURE OF CAPITALISM

TALISM, and there is no greater disaster than the state of capitalism today, from the climate, austerity programs, migration, and the pandemics of COVID and HIV. While corona is a virus that kills millions of people, capitalism imperils the entire working class. As with other disasters, it requires a revolution to eliminate its root causes and prevent new variants and pandemics. There is really no time to lose while we debate the perfect response and spend endless hours begging politicians to act.

In a nutshell, capitalism is the driver of pandemics and the major barrier to their elimination, because of its lethal physical and social effects on the working class. This article calls for a coordinated, international movement led by a party to establish a worker-controlled communist state.

Origins of COVID-19

Biologically, the coronavirus is a retrovirus that invades the cells of an animal or person, destroying cells, and leading to disease. HIV is also a retrovirus that kills immune cells, causing infections. Corona primarily damages the lungs, inducing suffocation and harming other organs as well. Vaccines prevent viral diseases, such as polio, but they do not cure them. Over time, if the viral spread continues, variants or mutations occur that may be more transmissible and deadly, such as the Delta variant. Therefore, we need to look upstream to the social and economic factors that lead to viral diseases. Corona originates in animals; it uses zoonotic transmission, spilling over from animals to humans.

Structurally, COVID-19 originates from capitalist modes of production. It is closely related to the food industry. Capitalists commodify or commercialize everything. People and animals are marketable, bought, sold, and exploited for profits accruing to a minority. The food industry is a prime example.

What are the ways the food industry causes spillovers and pandemics? Rob Wallace, an important epidemiologist writing on pandemics' structural origins in *Big Farms Make Big Flu and Dead Epidemiologists*, describes how major agricultural corporations like Tyson, Monsanto, and Smithfield and investors like Goldman-Sachs externalize profits and socialize the risks and costs. That is, take the loot and offload the problems on us.

Corporate irresponsibility:

- Farming closer to forests and deforestation, leading to closer contact between people and animal carriers, such as bats and chimps.
- Factory farming, caging animals like chickens and pigs in crowded conditions that reduce immunity and facilitate the spread of disease.
- Speeding up production in meatpacking plants with little protection for workers, who are "treated as sides of beef."¹
- Globalizing the production and consumption of food so that an infected pig grown in Asia can be barbecued in the US and other distant regions.
- Decreasing regulation and monitoring of production sites.

Under capitalism, the government serves the rich, whether led by Democrats or Republicans. It facilitates the spread of disease except when it threatens corporate profits. Therefore, we see governments encourage masks and vaccination while opening schools and businesses.

Government culpability for COVID-19 and other diseases include:

- Increasing worker vulnerability through austerity programs that eliminate or reduce jobs, unemployment compensation, rent cancellation, affordability and availability of food, access to health care, and housing.
- Reducing funding for 700 jobs at the CDC, which is responsible for disease prevention, surveillance, and vaccine recommendations.
- Decreasing inspections of factories.
- Spreading confusing messages. There is no national policy about prevention and protection; each state can make decisions about vaccination and masking.
- Allowing misinformation about immunizations and masking.
- Creating trade policies, such as the TRIPS agreement that protects pharmaceutical companies from sharing their vaccine and drug information, and others, like NAFTA, which prohibit countries from interfering with corporate profits.
- Enforcing immigration policies that criminalize and endanger people trying to enter the U.S. and European countries, leaving them unvaccinated, caged in crowded conditions, or living unsheltered.
- Denying asylum to thousands of Haitians and Central Americans from entering the U.S. under the guise of avoiding disease transmission, a provision of the Title 42 public health law.
- Incarcerating people in crowded conditions and denying their release, especially elderly

and sick people.

- Hoarding the vaccines and refusing to support the vaccine patent waiver to give other countries access to the technology to produce vaccines.

The effects on the working class are disastrous. As of mid-September, approximately 228,000,000 have contracted the virus, and close to 5,000,000 have died.²

Racism

COVID-19 represents the typical distribution of disease. Its morbidity, hospitalization, and mortality rates are higher for low income black, Latin, and indigenous people than better-resourced white workers on average. Because of the typical racist labor patterns, these workers provide services in retail, transportation, and hospitality, and are therefore more likely to be exposed to the virus. Many of their jobs do not provide sick leave that would allow them to heal and get the vaccine. White workers also suffer from racism. On average, their wages are higher, and their unemployment rates are lower. However, the ability of racist ideas to divide workers and create conflicts between them, imperils all workers' economic and social well-being. The unity of workers globally is critical.³

This is clearly unrelated to anything biological; there are no genetic differences between these groups. However, politicians and the public continue to blame patients for choosing unhealthy behaviors and exposures. Immigrants are often portrayed as disease vectors, and the risk of transmission to U.S. residents is used as a reason to block their entrance into the U.S.

Never mind that impoverished people live in crowded and risky environments where exposure to the coronavirus is more likely. Or that remote working is impossible because they have jobs that require face-to-face working conditions. Forget that 30,000,000 people under 65 in 2020 have no health insurance to cover medical visits with primary caregivers and secure medication for conditions that predispose them to more severe COVID-19 complications. Ignore the history of oppressive healthcare and experimentation that fosters mistrust and vaccine hesitancy.

Oppression of women

The pandemic has pulled women out of their jobs as they take primary responsibility for childcare and household tasks. Women serve as the primary commodities in the social reproduction of the working class through giving birth, raising children, and providing elder care. Women have lost \$800 billion in income globally, losing over 64 million jobs.⁴ Ten percent of U.S. women left their jobs, and 47% took unpaid sick leave.⁵ These factors will increase pay and gender inequities, and reduce family income, creating family conflicts and mental stress.

Nationalism and vaccine equity

Access to vaccines follows the pattern of access to any other essential component of life. Countries like the U.S. have an abundance of vaccines, while countries in Africa have a scarcity due to the profit imperatives of the pharmaceutical companies that produced Moderna (primarily funded by NIH), Pfizer, and others. Globally, 5.5 billion doses have been given. However, 80% have been given in high- and upper-income nations and only 2 percent in Africa; low-income countries have only vaccinated 1.5 doses for every 100 people.⁶

Anti-working-class vaccine refusal

Masks, social distancing, and vaccination can reduce the risk of acquiring and spreading the virus. The U.S. promulgates a culture of individualism and selfishness. In this context, the government allows people to refuse life-saving interventions during a global pandemic under the guise of individual choice. As of this publication, unvaccinated people have flooded hospitals, pushing out patients who need elective surgery and cancer treatment, and exhausting caregivers who face a situation that is totally preventable. Idaho now allows hospitals to ration care, such as ICU beds and oxygen.

Anti-vaccination is anti-working class. Being anti-vaccination is an anti-working-class position. It is also racist since black, indigenous, and Latin workers are contracting and dying from COVID-19 at higher rates.

The right-wing nationalists inflame the anti-vaccination movement by spreading lies and attacking science. This gutter-racist and anti-science propaganda serves to divide the working class of the United States. The white nationalists want to continue the terms that represent the brutality of racism that our class has felt for centuries. They want to silence us by turning a rational and scientific response to a deadly disease into a personal choice under the guise of freedom. Freedom is the understanding of necessity not reckless actions that endanger the world.

Teachers and health care providers who refuse vaccination under the excuse that it is "my body, my choice," belittle the very real struggle women have over their own means of reproduction. They are

danger to their students and patients, as well as their families and themselves.

The history of racist and sexist medical experiments worldwide rightly sows distrust in the medical establishment and the government. However, when vaccination is soundly based on scientific evidence, vaccine hesitancy will cause black and Latin students and their families to suffer more. The bosses have their own reasons for wanting to get us to sacrifice for the social good, like protecting their profits and building for war, but we need to fight for workers to serve our own interests. It is not "segregation" to quarantine potential disease carriers during a global pandemic!

Amid a pandemic, people who vaccinate exemplify social responsibility to their fellow workers to keep the vulnerable from dying. Participation in vaccine clinical trials and the dedication of healthcare workers are other displays of social responsibility. Whether conscious or not, they serve the working class.

Organizing goals: reforms, socialism, or communism?

These causes and effects can help us determine our goals. Exploitation, the ability of capitalists to make profit from workers' production, forms the basis of capitalism. Elections, union organizing, legislation, collectives, mutual aid, or social safety nets do not abolish this fundamental feature. They do not change the class of people who control the economy and government, who can always take back any gains workers make. The calls for abolition of prisons and policing may win some changes, such as using mental-health social workers instead of police officers to intervene in confrontations. However, the ruling class will not eliminate police departments since they are essential to control workers. The ruling class will not create the social conditions that reduce the impoverishment behind many criminalized activities, such as drug wars or sex work. Do we really want to free killer cops like Derek Chauvin or allow many others to work unindicted and unconvicted?

To prevent outbreaks like corona, workers need to seize and maintain power. A communist society based on collective ownership of land, resources, and production can create humane and safe means of food production. It can eliminate wages that create hierarchies of inequality. Without profit and exploitation, we can reduce racist practices and beliefs, and socialize [share] so-called women's work with public childcare, cooking and dining, and respite for parents.

Communism differs from socialism in these major ways. Socialism maintains a wage system, uses elections to "win," and doesn't change the class controlling industry. It does redistribute resources to workers and promotes healthy policies. However, socialists cannot achieve equality without taking control, and capitalists do not relinquish power without a tremendous armed battle.

Communism espouses similar goals that socialists have. However, it will abolish the wage system that ranks workers in a hierarchy based on jobs and wages. People will contribute services and receive the necessities, recognizing that we all have basic needs. Families with more children or medical problems will receive housing, food, and care based on these needs. Communists organize a party to debate political positions, organize struggles, and deploy people to different issues. They unite workers from around the world to fight racism, the oppression of women, and poverty, recognizing that capitalism oppresses workers of all nationalities and so-called racial categories. Communists use democratic centralism to make and carry out decisions, spending as much time as necessary to decide and then having everyone implement the decision. We can learn from the mistakes of the Soviet Union and China as we develop new ways to organize society and make new mistakes. Both societies allowed bourgeois [business] people to share power with the working class, thinking that they would support communist goals. They didn't. Capitalism wasn't born in a day; communism will develop and advance as we learn what works to achieve our goals.

In the field of public health, the state can pour people and other resources into scientific research, vaccinations, health care for all, and decent living conditions.

After the revolution in Russia, people's health improved dramatically due to improved nutrition and housing. Life expectancy increased by close to 30 years by 1970, and infant mortality dropped from 250 deaths per 1000 births to 20 per 1000 births. The Soviet government aimed to eliminate all infectious diseases, often using authoritarian means. It created the Sanitation and Epidemiology Service to identify and quarantine people with infections, vaccinate populations, conduct medical research, and build medical schools, plague-research labs, and sanitation training centers; its reach and effects spread into nearly every Soviet village. While many may condemn their forceful measures, they eliminated infectious diseases, including cholera, TB, tetanus, typhoid, measles, and whooping cough. The director of the major research lab said that the interventions worked, "and isn't that what mattered?" When the Soviet Union dissolved, life expectancy plummeted and chronic diseases increased as the government stopped funding research.⁷

The Chinese communist state also achieved huge improvements in public health after the 1949 Revolution. It mobilized masses of people to remove snails from waterways to successfully stop the spread of schistosomiasis, offered jobs to drug dealers and sex workers to end their practices, and legalized divorce so women could leave exploitative relationships.⁸ They also mobilized young people to train as teachers and "barefoot doctors," the forebears of physician assistants. Deployed to the rural villages, they increased literacy and provided basic healthcare that villagers never had.⁹ Many people who condemn the Cultural Revolution are wealthier people who lost their personal wealth and position without hearing the voices of poorer workers.

Organizing strategies: reform struggles, mutual aid, anti-racism; Left/liberal errors

Our goals influence our organizing strategies. People trying to reform capitalism, such as demanding higher wages or voting rights, focus on lobbying politicians and staging rallies for the media.

Building cooperatives is another popular strategy. People hope these non-profit worker- and community-owned enterprises will grow and overwhelm capitalism. However, these cannot scale up to include everyone, and more importantly, there will never be a peaceful change of power and economic systems (see South Africa!).

There are some important benefits of reforms. First, we cannot sit by and do nothing when our brothers and sisters suffer so much from COVID, hunger, climate disasters, and the lack of housing. Second, campaigns teach us how the system works, whom we can trust, and how to breach divisions. Most importantly, we can meet people who want to fight for more.

However, continuing to vote for politicians who claim to be against pharma greed but vote against negotiating drug prices in Medicare or who claim to be concerned about climate change but support fossil-fuel industries, is clearly a losing strategy. Spending weeks and months with legislators, who pass legislation that will be vetoed or make speeches when they already know a reform is doomed, is another time and life waster for progressive folks.

Mutual aid is often charity rather than class solidarity, but many good folks are in this effort. This is an early form of political commitment that mirrors the adage "from each according to political commitment and to each according to need."¹⁰ The selfless rescue missions of ordinary people, including white men evacuating black families from flooded homes during Hurricane Katrina, demonstrate the solidarity of workers facing disasters. Rebecca Solnit, in *A Paradise Built in Hell: The Extraordinary Communities That Arise in Disaster* (2010), presents the stories of workers providing recovery and mutual aid that the government refused to provide. While mutual aid cannot replace the working class in power, it builds trust and solidarity among neighbors and can be used to make demands on the government and raise revolutionary ideas.

Many public health workers have felt overwhelmed by the efforts to deal with structural racism, COVID-19 disparities, pandemic unemployment, and evictions. Energized by the George Floyd protests many felt that change might really be possible. Efforts to remove police from schools and replace police with mental-health advocates seemed like a no-brainer. Certainly, the pandemic made it seem like mutual aid in neighborhoods could help workers survive while a new government could keep workers solvent and housed. Few thought the Democratic Biden government would allow people to lose unemployment benefits and refuse rent cancellation. Zoom connected people all over the world in vibrant discussions and organizing; surely that solidarity would help build the movement. Vaccines of all sorts would stop COVID. Workers would be respected, and universal healthcare would be the logical solution just like free vaccinations.

Unfortunately, the expanded activity has not guaranteed any of these things. State power still resides with finance capital on Wall Street and the bankers and industrialists of the U.S. Racism and sexism remain unchecked and worsened in many areas.

Police murder continues. More families lose loved ones, including white people, but disproportionately among black and Latin workers. The criminal legal system continues to incarcerate at the same rate so that jails that were partially emptied during COVID are back in strength during Delta. School-board members and residents with BLM signs in their yards resist changes to policing in schools and neighborhoods.

Internationally fascist groups are gaining strength, and the EU does not even want to support the TRIPS waiver to make vaccine production possible around the globe. China is now seizing its opportunity in Afghanistan to expand its Belt and Road Initiative, tightening its control over Hong Kong and the Uyghurs, and building its military in the South China Sea. Vaccine imperialism is a new concept as Chinese vaccines compete in South America and Africa.

The only hope for the working classes of the world is a communist revolution built on antiracism and working-class solidarity, rejecting all alliances with anti-U.S. imperialist powers, such as China. If destroying capitalism is our goal, it is urgent to unite the working class, including GLs, conduct political education to win hearts and minds, and recruit masses of people to the party. Meeting activists in the struggles for reform is necessary, but only using our time to build a revolutionary communist party with the outlook of seizing state power can be worth anything in the long and short run. We invite you to join the Progressive Labor Party, read our newspaper, *Challenge-Desafío* at plp.org, and join our study groups. IP

¹Rob Wallace, *Dead Epidemiologists: On the Origins of COVID-19* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2020).

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⁶Tyler Pager, Laurie McGinley, and Dan Diamond, "U.S. to buy hundreds of millions more doses of Pfizer vaccine to donate to the world," *Washington Post*, September 17, 2021, available online at <https://www.washingtonpost.com/health/2021/09/17/biden-pfizer-vaccine-global>.

⁷Laurie Garrett, *Betrayal of Trust: The Collapse of Global Public Health* (New York: Hyperion, 2000).

⁸Joshua S. Horn, *Away with All Pests: An English Surgeon in People's China, 1954-1969* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1971).

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¹⁰A play on a phrase from Karl Marx, "Critique of the Gotha Programme" (1875).